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ABSTRACT

The original rationale for state teacher certification regulations was that they afforded the public a measure of protection against frauds and incompetents and against the capriciousness or low standards of local school boards. However, recent evidence (1985) shows that there is not much difference in quality and effectiveness between certified and noncertified teachers. Problems in the area of teacher certification include low standards (virtually all aspirants clear the certification process); significant personnel losses (7 out of 10 education majors do not take teaching jobs); high attrition rate (half of those who enter teaching leave the profession within five years); and skills imbalance (for example, in Texas, in 1991, two future teachers were graduated qualified to teach calculus, but 500 were prepared to coach football). Suggested changes to the certification process include: (1) a national teaching certificate, for which teachers would voluntarily apply; (2) an examination system with high standards; (3) a 10-year moratorium on certification requirements during which schools could hire college graduates with majors in academic subjects whether or not they took education courses; (4) hiring teachers from unconventional sources; and (5) flexible certification. (Contains 24 references.) (MAH)

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RETHINKING TEACHER CERTIFICATION

ISSUE BRIEF

by

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ISSUE BRIEF

RETHINKING TEACHER CERTIFICATION

THE PROBLEM

Certification of teachers, including both pre-service requirements that lead to certification and in-service requirements during the teacher's career, have been longstanding problems in public education. [1] Evidence shows that there isn't a great deal of difference between the quality and effectiveness of noncertified teachers and those who are certified. [2] A 1953 report said there were no known studies that showed the certification process is effective, and a 1985 update of that report repeated that claim.[3]

THE THEORY

There are various theories from which to choose in looking for a satisfactory method to obtain qualified educators.

One is John Stuart Mill's: "It would be giving too dangerous a power to governments, were they allowed to exclude any one from professions, even from the profession of teacher, for alleged deficiency of qualifications; and I think ... that degrees, or other public certificates of scientific or professional acquirements, should be given to all who present themselves for examination, and stand the test; but that such certificates should confer no advantage over competitors other than the weight which may be attached to their testimony by public opinion."[4]

Nearly 150 years later a model of that approach is being developed, as a national board prepares a voluntary evaluation system.

In the interim, however, the accepted theory has been that a process mandated by government will result in better qualified educators than would otherwise be the case. The irony is that this theory has been applied only to public school educators. There are no such requirements for educators in nonpublic schools, or in higher education, including even higher education faculty preparing others to be public school educators. Yet these seem to perform at least as well as their public school counterparts.

Thus the strange circumstance that one has to be certified to teach in a public school but not certified to teach someone to teach in a public school.

Former Harvard President, and education reformer, James Bryant Conant, noted another irony, when blame for the current system is placed on higher education.

He claimed that "the most vigorous support for the whole concept of certification comes not from the college professors of education ... but from the teachers' associations which count few college professors of any kind among their membership. These organizations have been able to muster the necessary political fire-power to contain attacks from those who would radically reform certification regulations."[5]

That, by itself, need not be a problem, since everyone has a right to defend their interest. But such a defense should be based on some evidence, not just repeated assertions about the necessity to maintain "quality," which itself is not defined. As suggested, it has been pointed out time after time that such evidence is lacking, which reduces the basis of certification requirements to one of political power plays. This is not satisfactory.

James D. Koerner wrote, "The original rationale for state certification regulations was that they afforded the public a measure of protection against frauds and incompetents ... and against the capriciousness or low standards of local school boards."[6]

THE REALITY

The actual result, Koerner con-

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cludes, is that "state certification has now become one of the classic examples of administrative rigidity."[7]

Few government imposed education regulations have been less effective in achieving its purported goals than certification of educators.

To compound the problem, a system that doesn't work results in a certification that, in many cases, has been permanent.

A Pennsylvania study more than 30 years ago concluded that "Permanent certificates insure security for teachers but they can saddle the Commonwealth with a 40-year wait before a change in certification requirements can be fully implemented."[8]

Only recently has the state begun long overdue reforms.

Both Judith Brody Saks[9] and Arthur Wise[10], have termed teacher certification "a joke."

Wise, President of the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, who has been a supporter of public education, added that these rules, "don't distinguish between those who can and those who cannot teach. They're a series of bureaucratic routines, which some say serve only to keep talented people out of teaching."[11]

Martin Haberman has been more outspoken in his criticism. He concludes that, "for traditional forms of teacher education ... the game is over."[12]

One reason is that the licensing mechanisms "developed for the teaching profession appear to have emerged haphazardly ... During the past seventy-five years ... some three thousand local licensing authorities have been reduced to the fifty state systems and a handful of large city school districts."[13]

College degrees were not required in some states until the 1950s and, in Colorado, not until 1961.[14]

Even where requirements appear to be strict, "the real objective is often job security and the interest of those who control the training of new teachers and their entry into the market."[15]

There has been no thoroughly researched or tested procedure developed for teacher preparation, or subsequent evaluation as to which approach or program might have achieved the best results.

Present certification standards are not standardized across the country and sometimes seem to be nonexistent.

There are other problems. For one, few students fail to clear the certification process. Years ago the dean of a school of education at a large university was asked if students preparing to be teachers were ever rejected. He said yes. When asked how many that year, he said twelve, while 1,200 graduated. A 99 percent survival rate is hardly a stringent standard.

Secondly, many students who are cleared to teach fail to enter the profession. Haberman reports that 68 percent of the newly certified teachers in Minnesota, and 70 percent in Wisconsin, do not take teaching jobs.[16] That is, they go through the teacher preparation process, generally heavily subsidized by public dollars, but then choose not to teach.

Whether this is due to poor counseling or other causes, the decision of seven out of 10 education majors to pursue other careers is, at best, a very wasteful process. Imagine the outcry if 70 percent of medical students, or law students, or engineers, should choose other careers upon completion of their training.

Also, if this year is typical, nearly half of those who do enter teaching will be gone within five years. Again, something is wrong. No other profession has such a high attrition rate.

James Michener pointed out another distortion, noting last year that only two future teachers were graduated in Texas qualified to teach calculus, but there were 500 prepared to coach football.[17]

Boston University President John Silber has called for the abolition of all the certification rules for teachers, and the avoidance of what he calls "all that repulsive work that has to be done at schools of education."[18]

As can be seen, not all criticism of the process and the results originates outside the profession.

PROSPECTS FOR REFORM

It has often been noted that the United States is a crisis-oriented society; that we tend to support the status quo until problems create a crisis that must be addressed.

This may now be the case with public education in this nation, both in general and with regard to specifics, such as certification.

Diane Ravitch, currently an Assistant Secretary in the U.S. Department of Education, has also established a reputation as a leading educational historian. She thinks that "the present crisis in education and the depressed condition of the teaching profession offer an unusual opportunity to reassess our present arrangements for preparing teachers ... The traditional screen — state certification — is almost entirely ineffective."[19]

There are signs that opportunity is being realized, and at an accelerating pace. "In 1984, only eight states offered some form of alternative certification; by 1986, 23 states had such programs."[20]

Also in 1986, a survey of 585 education schools found 43 percent said they had developed alternate certification programs.[21] Another event that year appears to be bearing fruit.

In May a Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession issued its report, *A Nation Prepared*, in which it advocated the creation of a national teaching certificate, for which teachers would voluntarily apply. Those receiving it might be accorded more status, perhaps more pay, and it would also make it easier for teachers to move from state to state without having to be recertified.

A national board has since been established, with a multi-million dollar budget, to develop such a nationally recognized certificate, which, as suggested, would be acquired voluntarily.[22]

Three decades ago, James Koerner thought an examination system with high standards would be the most that could be hoped for in the next 25 years; that it would be a giant step forward "if such exams were only superimposed on the present system of formal training."[23]

As he suspected, it didn't happen within that time frame, but it may not have missed by much.

John Silber has proposed a 10-year moratorium on teacher-certification requirements during which schools could hire college graduates with majors in academic subjects whether or not they took education courses. He believes that if just one state would try this, "the improvement of its educational program would be so swift and so dramatic that parents and taxpayers in each of the other 49 would demand and get its establishment there."[24]

During the past school year 39 states were using or considering some form of alternative certification, one of the most successful of which is in New Jersey where certification can be acquired while one is actually teaching.

There is also a program called Teach America, which seeks out potential teachers from unconventional sources and helps them get into the classroom.

One report said early indications are that those hired in this manner over the past few years are better, more successful, and more likely to show initiative than those hired with the normal certification stamp of approval. About one-third of the teachers hired in New Jersey during the 1990-91 school year did so under this alternative program.

As far back as the 1960s, Pennsylvania had a working example of flexible certification that it could have made more widely available.

The Philadelphia school district could exempt five percent of its professional employees from the state's certification requirements. It was under this provision that Marcus Foster, certified as an elementary principal, was appointed as principal of Gratz High School, which greatly improved under his leadership.[25]

At the very least, if the state is going to control entry into public school teaching then it should, in fact, control it. At present, "this power has for all practical purposes been delegated to private educational organizations or coalitions representing teachers colleges, teachers unions, school administrators, and other groups with a vested interest in the status quo."[26]

Some would go further than alternative certification, national exams, and the like, believing that "abundant technology exists to facilitate a great deal of learning without mediation by certified teachers ... (yet) these issues cannot even be seriously discussed."[27]

It might also be helpful to consider what teachers in the field believe, rather than just the positions taken by organizations.

Numerous "surveys show that most teachers do not feel their education-related course work prepared them to teach. They cite their own experience and their interaction with other teachers as the most important factors in their development."[28]

Studies in Texas and California show no differences between teachers with traditional certification and those who pursued an alternate route, and New Jersey's alternative program, which now certifies more than 10 percent of all teachers entering the profession in this manner, has not only worked very well but "has also proven successful at attracting well-educated minorities," which the traditional approach has difficulty doing.[29]

Whether any meaningful reform of the certification regulations occurs will largely depend on the general public and the business community. Supporters of the status quo will oppose significant change, as they have demonstrated time and again.

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August 1992

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